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Interview

of

General David A. Burchinal

~~MICROFILMED BY HQ AFM~~

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During this time, of course, was a time when the President had gone to Vienna and had not had a very successful meeting with Khrushchev. Not very long after that, was when we first picked up for the first time that something strange was going on in Cuba. I was, at that time, Director of Plans on the Air Staff, and the operational problems centered, of course, in the Joint Staff. In the "tank", my job from the Air Force side was preparing all our inputs and positions. So, I was among the early ones to know that all of a sudden we had a problem in Cuba. And it was fantastic how well that secret was kept, until the President announced it two weeks after we knew it was going on. We knew it from our photos, U2s at high altitude, first off the coast and then actual over-flights. And we watched the missiles go in and we could see the classic pattern develop for missile sites from those we had seen developing in the Soviet Union. There they were. Then we spotted the first launchers, the transports or--erector-launchers. We saw the stuff coming in undercover, as deck loads on ships, unloaded at night. And then we saw the equipment beginning to appear on the sites until it was very clear what was happening. Now, this was over a period of a week or ten days perhaps, not a word was drifting out on this at all. We were watching the photos and increasing the intelligence reconnaissance and establishing beyond question of a doubt that this was happening. And sleeping at the Pentagon every night--I didn't leave the Pentagon for over a week. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were meeting twice and sometimes three times a day with McNamara, in the morning, afternoon and the evening. Then McNamara would go to the White House. The White House, together with McNamara and the chiefs, began developing options as a continuous series of pluses and minuses. And that's when the group

across the river separated into the hawks and the doves. A couple of things that were interesting about that time was the exposure of the real McNamara. I attended all the sessions. It was unusual because I was an extra Air Force member. I remember one session where we were talking about the missiles, and Mr. McNamara was trying to figure courses of action; so he turned to General LeMay and said, "Now Curt, we are pretty sure those are Soviet Technicians down there, and I want to go in with an air strike," and we had air strike plans for every option you could think of, from a complete wipe out to demonstrations, or whatever. He said, "I don't want to kill any of those technicians but I would like to wound a couple." He said, "I don't want to destroy any of those missiles, I just would like to damage one. Can we do that?" LeMay looked at him and he said, "You must have lost your mind." (Laughter) In fact, he was serious. "I don't want to kill them, I just want to hurt them. I don't want to destroy them, I just want to damage them. Now, let's use the airplanes to do that kind of thing," and LeMay just looked at him and said, "You have lost your mind."

Some of these were pretty basic exchanges that they had with the Secretary in those days. I won't forget another one. We had a U-2 flying over the Arctic, and the kid lost his navigation system, trying to get back into Alaska he came right smack over the middle of the Kola Peninsula. We had picked him up on radar, and we got a flash report out of Alaska. They picked him up and knew where he was and he got his outbound course, but he was still right over the middle of the Kola Peninsula, and the word came into the "tank" where McNamara and the Chiefs were meeting, "We've got a U-2 at 75,000 feet over the Kola Peninsula." He turned absolutely white,

and yelled hysterically, "This means war with the Soviet Union. The President must get on hot line to Moscow!" And he ran out of that meeting in a frenzy. Very frantic! By that time we were in a pretty advanced stage of the crisis and just before the President spoke to the public. But, what we had done--fortunately we were given considerable latitude--we had called all of the missiles back that were in the hands of the contractor for maintenance and repair, called them in and counted them down to combat ready. We increased the airborne alert force of B-52s, up to a third of the force. We had SAC bombers on nuclear alert with weapons in the bomb-bays on civilian airfields all over the US. We dispersed the air defense force, with nuclear weapons, also on civilian airports all over the country.

All these moves were signals the Soviets could see and we knew they could see them. We got everything we had, in the strategic forces, nuclear forces, counted down and ready and aimed and we made damn sure they saw it without anybody saying a word about it. And there it was. Simultaneously, we moved in to Florida--I thought it would sink in terms of tactical Air Forces that we moved into Florida, airplanes, bombs and rockets. We had enough, literally, to take Cuba from one end to the other, and we could go with whatever option they wanted. Invasion or air strike, we could run it. And still no word was going out. Here is the picture--MacDill, Homestead, all TAC bases are covered with airplanes, 100s of them, sitting there ready to go. But not a word leaking out. We really wondered how the secret was kept, why word didn't get out, right up to the President's message when he told Khrushchev that a missile out of Cuba was the same as a missile from the Soviet Union.

And our Ambassador in Moscow at that time was Fay Kohler, he said, "It was very clear that the United States took the Chairman right to the brink of nuclear war and he (Khrushchev) looked over the edge and had no stomach for it."

And it was that total preparation we had made that Khrushchev saw, and he knew we had called his hand. He had no alternative but to pull them out and back down. The military saw the situation very clearly; that the Soviets had no choice, there was no question, he had to say, "I give up." There was no question of going to war, he couldn't do it, and he never alerted a bomber or changed his own military posture one bit. We had a gun at his head and he didn't move a muscle. And there was no nuclear confrontation. But, you couldn't convince Mr. McNamara, or some of the civilian types, that this was so, that this was a military fact. We still had the superiority in strategic power to stand him down, nuclear superiority, and he had no alternative. That was that. It was never understood right up to the President that the safest thing he ever said was that, "A missile out of Cuba is a missile out of the Soviet Union." And everybody thought this was a great nuclear confrontation. It was over before it started, but not even our own people knew it. So, about that time, also, we decided to impose a blockade, and we put our naval vessels out on picket--no more ships coming into Cuba. They would be challenged on the high seas regardless of flag, and they'd be searched, and if they had anything that falls under war materiel they will be turned around or they will be sunk. So, we set it up. And, there was control in detail, so there was a phone from the Secretary of Defense's office right to the deck of the damn destroyer

on patrol in this blockade. So, the first ship comes up to the blockade line. He's a Swede. They give him the signal "heave-to", "Standby", "what is your cargo?" And he said, "Go to hell!" Full steam ahead, and he went right through the damn blockade and right through the damn blockade and right on into Havana. Nobody stopped him. He just said, "The hell with you--nobody tells me what to do on the high seas with my ship." So, they just looked at each other, these people who were now learning to "manage crises" and run wars. "That didn't work very well. What do we do now?" And so our signal caller had said, "Don't shoot," and the destroyer had said, "I'm ready to stop him. "No, no, let him go, let him go." So, the next ship comes along and he's a Lebanese--he's flying a Lebanese flag. So, they challenge him. And he said, "Oh, I'm very happy to comply. I'll stop, come aboard, here I am, I'm just a poor Lebanese out here running my ship into Cuba." So, they went on board and opened up his hatches, and he's got a bunch of military electronic gear, and they shut the hatches down, pretended it wasn't there, and said, "Pass, friend." And he steamed merrily into Havana. That was our naval blockade. And that's the way it was being run under the kind of civilian control we had. Just don't create any kind of a crises, anywhere. There were two big arguments going on. One was the nuclear confrontation argument that we had already solved. That we won hands down. The second one was, do you invade Cuba or don't you? And, of course, the military and the hawks wanted to go in and clean it out--take out Castro, get rid of the problem decisively for all time, and the other side didn't want to invade, just talk. We will do a little of this, or a little of that. We had some incidents, some planes shot up, so we went in and took a few retaliatory

actions. We just fiddled around. Well, we had the Marines coming all the way around from the Pacific through the Canal, one invasion force after another was loading up on the East Coast. Airborne outfits ready to roll. It was a real session. We had the capability to do the job but in the final analysis it was the indecision. . . at the top. Nobody would bite the bullet. So the second decision, do we invade? No! We couldn't blockade; we had won the missile showdown and they were going to pull them out, and we'd settle for that. That was our victory. And so that's what we settled for. It was very interesting that a little later down the road, in another situation, it was handled quite differently with quite different results. It was in the Dominican Republic, and a hard core Communist group had overthrown the Government, created a coup and was going to take over. And we were going to be faced with another Communist set-up like Cuba in the Dominican Republic. We had a little different President then. We had Lyndon B. Johnson, who had just taken over not long before. And he was called by Bus Wheeler at that point, fairly late one night--and briefed on the situation. Johnson said, "I'll give you one direction, and that is that that island is not going to go Communist. Whatever you have to do, do it!" So, we put together in two days the airborne forces we had available to the Air Force and Army. Really, a force to move in and take the place over. And instead of putting together an eye dropper force, we put together three times as much as we needed and we moved them into Puerto Rico, staged them, put new men into Dominican Republic and told them to knock it off. They saw how big it was, and then the whole thing collapsed. And when it collapsed, the local people who were against the Communists were ready to clean the Com-